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*R. D. E.*

# **South Africa: Defense Strategy in an Increasingly Hostile World**

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## **SOUTH AFRICA: DEFENSE STRATEGY IN AN INCREASINGLY HOSTILE WORLD**

Information available as of December 1979 was  
used in the preparation of this memorandum.

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## FOREWORD

This memorandum analyzes the defense strategy of the South African Government as it appears to be evolving, and discusses major implications of this strategy for South Africa over the next three to four years. The paper also suggests some possible implications for the United States during the same period. The basic drafts of the memorandum were prepared by [ ] of the Defense Intelligence Agency, with the participation of other DIA analysts and analysts in the Central Intelligence Agency; the Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Department of State; and the National Security Agency. The paper was coordinated at a working level within the Intelligence Community. Differences of view are noted where they exist. Queries or comments may be directed to the office of the National Intelligence Officer for Africa [ ]

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## KEY JUDGMENTS

The South African Government under Prime Minister P. W. Botha is developing a set of interrelated strategies designed to make South Africa substantially more immune to foreign economic pressures and to enable it to act with greater independence in the political and military fields.

Over the next three to four years, these strategies are likely to result in:

- An expanded and strengthened military establishment, with somewhat greater nonwhite participation, structured to operate in both counter guerrilla and conventional modes.
- A capability to produce and deploy nuclear weapons on short notice.
- A degree of economic self-sufficiency greater than that prevailing now, but still incomplete in important respects (even though the economy can already sustain an import cutoff of more than a year).
- A restructuring of apartheid that will further reduce the more obvious forms of racial discrimination without intentionally altering the fundamental idea of separation of races and the dominating role of the white community.
- A foreign policy focus on South Africa's regional situation with a view to creating as large a geographical and functional area of cooperation as possible with neighboring states.

The South Africans hope that the effects of these developments will be to mitigate their country's international isolation, create a regional buffer zone which denies hostile black nationalism and Communism a foothold, and encourage nonwhites to feel they have a stake in South African society even though it remains under white control.

These hopes are not likely to be fulfilled to any large degree. The racial attitudes of the South African white community are not likely to evolve fast enough or appear sufficiently unambiguous to win significant support in the black and other nonwhite communities or to stifle foreign critics. South Africa therefore is likely to experience:

- Gradually increasing international isolation, with fewer members of the international community willing to extend overt cooperation.

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- A continuation of regional tensions, with the question of white dominance in South Africa as the core issue.
- Growing divisiveness as well as resistance within the black communities in South Africa, with continuing ambivalence on the part of other nonwhites.

For the United States, these developments and trends imply a sharpening of the dilemmas surrounding Western policies toward South Africa:

- As South Africa becomes more resistant to specific economic pressures, US ability to influence its leaders through these means will decline further.
- As regional tensions persist, the dangers of further Soviet or other Communist involvement will also persist and possibly grow, although the likelihood of direct military intervention still appears low.
- As South African military capabilities, and willingness to use those capabilities, increase, conflicting demands that the Western powers “do something” about South Africa and about Communist influence in the region will also increase.
- Those limited successes which South African strategies do achieve will serve more to fuel debate and create confusion of purpose in the West than to reduce African pressures for action.

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## DISCUSSION

## The South African Environment

1. White South Africans see themselves in a struggle against a "total onslaught" by black guerrillas and radical states supported by Communist powers. Since the first settlers arrived at the Cape of Good Hope more than 300 years ago, whites have been concerned for their survival and their privileged way of life. Years of conflict with black tribes, struggle against British colonialism, and the southward march of African nationalism have produced among whites an "us or them" view of the world that shapes their attitudes and forms the framework within which successive governments have formulated foreign and domestic policies since the Afrikaner Nationalist Party took power in 1948.

2. In private, South African whites today sometimes talk pessimistically with outsiders about the future of their country. Their concerns are not usually focused on current events but on what the quality of life in South Africa may be for the next generation. Occasional media treatment of the emigration of skilled whites also attests to an underlying apprehension that the country's future is clouded. Attitudes, of course, differ among the white groups, although the differences have gradually become less pronounced. English-speaking South Africans tend to be more pessimistic and more inclined to look for opportunities in other countries, while Afrikaners tend to see themselves as without serious alternatives to staying in the country—"we have no boats to get into."

3. In public, however, government leaders project a tough, defiant stance. Deeply aware of their history, they look to the future and pragmatically plan for any plausible contingency, preferring to err on the side of preparedness rather than risk even the appearance of weakness in the face of a threat. So far, the leadership seems confident that, despite trials, white solidarity will be maintained, and that available human and material resources are sufficient to cope with any physical challenge that might be mounted from within or without.

4. With this outlook, South Africa's political and military leaders retain the overriding goal of preserving a system of separate development among the

country's races, with the white community in a dominant position. Nevertheless, the country's growing international isolation, springing fundamentally from its racial policies, has forced the white leadership into a probing reassessment of national priorities and into the formulation of a more coherent national defense strategy—or set of interrelated strategies—than leaders have previously offered. Thus, over the last few years, the government has moved perceptibly toward putting heavy emphasis on three elements:

- Ensuring that its military forces are not only materially strong and tactically flexible, but as little dependent on foreign supply as humanly possible.
- Developing an economy that is so self-sufficient that it can withstand prolonged periods of relative isolation from world trading patterns.
- Instilling in the South African population as a whole a strong sense of unity or, in the case of nonwhites, a stronger attachment to the political, social, and economic order.

In the view of the current leadership, South Africa's survival depends on accomplishing these objectives.

5. In practice, this has meant and will continue to mean that other policy objectives are subordinated to implementation of this strategy, and that extensive resources will continue to be diverted to the development of armed forces capable of dominating regional adversaries, deterring intervention by Communist powers, and meeting externally based guerrillas as far forward as possible. It means reinforced emphasis on internal security in the wake of the politically tranquil periods of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Here, however, the Botha government evidently intends a more sophisticated mix of repression and reform—with, for example, a pervasive police apparatus as well as new constitutional arrangements within the framework of separate development. It even means, at least on the part of the leadership, a willingness to forgo a high economic growth rate where this implies greater dependence on foreign countries and therefore greater vulnerability to international sanctions.



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6. It would, nonetheless, be a mistake to read all South African attitudes and policies as pointing in a single direction. White South Africans have long identified with the West and desire to be accepted as full members of the Western community. In the past, the government contended that it was a logical participant in the Western defense system, assuming it had a role in guarding the sea routes past the Cape. Years of rebuffs have lowered, but not eliminated completely, South African expectations. While Pretoria recognizes that it cannot expect Western support in southern Africa, it also calculates that the West is not unified and that extensive and profitable ties between South Africa and Western Europe—especially with the United Kingdom and France—can be counted on to prevent the West from acting in unison with others to impose effective economic sanctions. There is also a lingering hope, occasionally burgeoning into some small confidence, that all is not lost, and that future leaders of future governments in the West, especially in Washington, might take a different and more sympathetic position toward South Africa.

7. Furthermore, embedded in the rhetoric of Prime Minister Botha's concept of a "constellation" of states in southern Africa, there is not only a redefinition of the Afrikaner defensive laager, but also a sense that the ultimate prospects for better relations with black Africa generally may not be hopeless. The South Africans know from experience that their assistance and cooperation can be valued by other African leaders even though it cannot be acknowledged. Despite extolling the virtues of national self-reliance, South Africa continues to seek international and even regional respectability, and it is anxious to cooperate with any government prepared to enter into an open or a covert relationship.

### Forging the Strategic Tools

8. As the South Africans see it, the first and most immediate requirement to carry out a strategy of independence is to expand the size of the South African armed forces. Until recently, force expansion has come largely from heavier recruitment and lengthened callups from the white community, but plans now call for an appreciable increase in the use of volunteer personnel from the Indian, Colored, and black communities. The objective is to double the 1977 size of the Permanent Force (regular professional military personnel) by 1981, and enhance the commitment of nonwhites to national defense. To make

military service more attractive to nonwhites, the armed forces have moved much more rapidly than the wider society to reduce the petty aspects of racial discrimination.

9. Up to recently, the South African ground forces have been structured mostly for counterinsurgency operations, and military plans and training stress quick reaction, mobility, and aggressiveness against essentially guerrilla opponents. These would be engaged in forward areas, with ground and air strikes attacking guerrilla camps, while police and local reserve units took responsibility for countering operations in the interior of the country, particularly in the urban areas.

10. However, since the Angolan civil war, when the South African military first encountered in combat modern Soviet weaponry manned by foreign troops, there has been a growing perception of a conventional threat. This has hastened modifications of unit organization and development of major weapon systems, such as infantry fighting vehicles and heavy artillery. Training programs now stress increased readiness as well as combined arms operations. This implies a concept of striking preemptively beyond South Africa's frontiers at threatening military forces, using mobility, surprise, and overwhelming firepower while avoiding prolonged engagements that could cause a loss of skilled manpower and deplete inventories of sophisticated materiel not readily produced within South Africa.

11. This last consideration is particularly applicable to the South African Air Force, which probably gives special attention to the need to husband scarce resources, notably jet fighter aircraft. Maintaining air superiority would be critical for engaging opponents in forward areas, especially those outside the country, although in the event of a conventional engagement the Air Force's principal missions would remain to provide reconnaissance, transportation, and close air support to the ground forces. Paralleling the ground forces' interest in improving their capabilities for conventional warfare, the Air Force is upgrading the air defense system by using more effectively anti-aircraft weaponry and radars, by building hardened forward bases, and by developing a centralized command and control network.

12. The South African Navy, too, is being reoriented, in this case away from the potential NATO support role in the South Atlantic envisioned earlier and toward coastal and harbor defense missions (in-

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cluding Walvis Bay, which South Africa claims and in any case clearly hopes to have access to after Namibia becomes independent).

13. The South Africans intend to carry out this program of force expansion and redirection in the face of the UN arms embargo, imposed in 1977. Developing an indigenous arms industry capable of producing a full range of military equipment has thus become a prime strategic target. The priority now is on adapting foreign technology to local needs, with emphasis on the production of those relatively high technology items—missiles, radars, aircraft parts, heavy weapons—that must still be imported.

14. One special tool is available to the South Africans as an option in developing their strategy: their nuclear weapons program. There is no question that the South Africans have the technical capability to produce nuclear weapons. What is not clear is the use to which they now intend or eventually will put this capability. Certainly the knowledge or assumption on the part of other African leaders that such a capability and program exist adds a dimension to South Africa's quest for international influence. The South Africans have contributed to this by the ambiguity with which they have surrounded their program. In addition, it would appear almost certain that in South Africa's circumstances its leaders wish to have a nuclear weapons option available as a last resort defense against hostile threats or pressures.

#### Economic and Political Underpinning

15. To enable the South Africans to sustain and give real meaning to their "independent" defense strategy in southern Africa, they have for some years recognized that they must undertake specific economic programs to meet civilian as well as military needs. They have also, more belatedly, come to recognize that an independent strategy can carry implications for domestic as well as foreign political arrangements.

16. The threat of additional UN sanctions has given point to South Africa's programs in the economic field. By reducing imports of vital commodities such as oil,

encouraging import substitution industries, and building strategic stockpiles, South Africa's leaders intend to demonstrate economic invulnerability and thereby sow doubt about the impact of sanctions. The aim is not to cut ties with international economic partners, which would put white prosperity in immediate jeopardy, but rather to discredit the use of sanctions as a policy instrument against South Africa. If this failed, and sanctions came, the programs would limit damage and help buy time and room for further maneuver.

17. At the same time, the South African Government actively promotes the expansion of mineral exports desired by other countries, and this has the effect abroad of accentuating the potential negative consequences of breaking economic relations with South Africa. An implied threat that strategic minerals such as chromium or platinum-group metals might be withheld calls attention to South Africa's special importance to industrialized countries in the West and also Japan.

18. A more subtle element of South African economic calculations is the possibility of expanding and reinforcing economic links with other states of the southern and central African region. The reasoning here is that such links not only are desirable in themselves for political and economic benefits, but that they would create a situation in which sanctions against South Africa would strike at the economies of neighboring states as well, perhaps even generating urgent requirements for foreign relief assistance to the black-ruled states. For the West, then, the price of sanctions would go even higher.

19. Interest in deeper relations with other regional states goes well beyond economics, however. As South African political and military leaders have come to abandon strategies that rely on Western cooperation, they have given increasing consideration to a "forward defense" approach. South Africa, in addition to having strong economic ties with its neighbors, would become the hub of a "constellation"—a system of alliances and informal arrangements for military training, supply, and mutual defense. Namibia and Zimbabwe-Rhodesia, as well as the "homelands," are South Africa's most obvious candidates for participation in this kind of "constellation," but as many other states of the region as possible would be included. While this strategy in its purely military aspect has been resisted by opponents within the government—particularly in the Department of Foreign Affairs and the Department of National Security—who favor a less military-oriented

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approach to regional relations, the general concept evidently is attractive to Prime Minister (and Defense Minister) P. W. Botha.

20. One major reason for this attraction may be that it would appear to dovetail with the objective that Botha has so strongly espoused of building nonwhite commitment to national defense and reducing internal social tensions. To the degree that either of these efforts succeeds, South Africans would hope foreign criticism could be blunted and the way made easier for black-ruled states in the region to collaborate in various ways.

21. While Botha and like-minded colleagues are constrained by conservatives in the Nationalist Party and the Afrikaner community, they nonetheless are cautiously attempting to find compromises that give nonwhites the appearance of power sharing and whites the feeling that grand apartheid—geographic separation of blacks and whites—is being realized. Over the next few years, this approach will likely include carrying out measures that already have won grudging acceptance from white conservatives—reducing discrimination in jobs and public facilities, improving educational opportunities for nonwhites, and stimulating economic development in the black homelands. It will also include encouraging further discussion among whites and leaders of other races regarding proposals for limited regional autonomy for the separate white, Indian, Colored, and perhaps even black urban communities.

22. What the specific effects of such overtures as these may be on the leaders of other racial and ethnic communities is not easy to say, and would depend on the specific content of the proposals. Certainly some will be tempted to collaborate, even as the “leaders” of the various homelands are already doing. Beyond this, there is likely to be a wide range of response to government efforts at co-option. While some blacks will indeed cooperate, others will reject new arrangements as falling far short of their expectations. Still others will espouse or continue armed resistance. On the whole, however, those who reject all open cooperation are more likely to set the “ideal” for the majority of South African blacks.

### Can It Work?

23. Prospects for carrying out the various elements of South Africa’s strategy will depend heavily on domestic and international developments—the most “independent” strategy is not immune to the influence

of unforeseen or uncontrollable events. Also, while South Africa is remarkably self-reliant for a country of moderate size, commanding impressive resources with which to resist external threats and pressures and to maintain internal control, its capabilities are far from limitless.

24. Probably the first key factor that underlies most aspects of the Botha strategy is continued high earnings from mineral exports, because such a strategy is expensive. If export earnings failed to maintain a high level, as they did in the mid-1970s, South Africa probably would adjust its sights but would not abandon the goal of economic independence.

25. Another key factor will be the degree to which nonwhites give credence to the government’s proposals for dismantling some of the structure of racial discrimination and for increasing local autonomy and accept that such proposals do in fact promise a future that is worth defending in the present. If these proposals should be rejected, or accepted by only a small minority, the Afrikaner community would face yet again the need for a painful adjustment of its concepts to the reality of black African attitudes. The impact on strategy would be fairly direct: plans to incorporate increased numbers of nonwhites into the overall defense effort would encounter resistance from within the white community, as would the vision of a “constellation” of states.

26. In addition, if radical regimes should come to power in Zimbabwe-Rhodesia or Namibia, white South Africans would see even the modest beginnings of a “constellation” policy as having failed, and would be driven to rethink the character of their relations with black Africa and the nature of “forward defense.” Conversely, an outcome in Zimbabwe-Rhodesia that satisfies South Africa’s minimum desires—that is, a black government that is basically non-Communist, that does not openly support anti-South African guerrillas, and that accepts the desirability of retaining white skills and capital in Zimbabwe-Rhodesia—would give encouragement to the “constellation” strategists. At present, however, South African leaders appear more anxious than confident on this score.

27. There are also vulnerabilities closer to home. As a fighting force, South Africa’s military and security services are the most capable in Sub-Saharan Africa. They will remain far superior to the armed forces of neighboring nations for the foreseeable future, and they are likely to be able to contain any internal or guerrilla threat directed against the republic or Nami-

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bia for at least the three to four years of this study. Nonetheless, a simultaneous urban guerrilla campaign and conventional attack all along South Africa's borders—an unlikely worst case development in the next few years—would severely strain Pretoria's manpower and material resources, particularly if the Soviet Union were providing logistic support to South Africa's adversaries. The danger of depleting inventories of the more sophisticated weapons, which in many cases could not be replaced except over a prolonged period of time and/or with outside help, would be especially acute if the South Africans were engaged against Cuban forces, for example.

28. Shortages of skilled manpower will continue to hamper South Africa's armed forces in a variety of ways. The Permanent Force is most unlikely to reach the 1981 goal of doubling its 1977 manpower. The relatively small size of the white community, from which educationally and technically qualified personnel would mainly be drawn, cannot fully support a strategy that involves both maintaining a large active-duty force and the dispatch of large training or advisory missions to neighboring countries. Moreover, as long as some 15,000 to 20,000 troops are active in Namibia, the forces would be hard pressed to mount a multibrigade operation into another country.

29. South Africa will continue to fall short of full self-sufficiency in materiel production. Most of the equipment needed for counter guerrilla or internal security operations will be available from domestic sources, but a variety of items critical for conventional defense will have to come from abroad. The South Africans would not wish to share much scarce materiel with regional allies even though they probably will continue to succeed in evading the full effects of the 1977 arms embargo against them. Therefore, the strategy of forward defense would be conducted on a relatively small scale.

30. The prospects for the independence strategy are remarkably good in the economic arena, assuming that the world economy continues to sustain the factors needed to maintain demand for South African exports. The South African economy has supported steadily increasing allocations to defense since 1974, and it is capable of sustaining substantial augmentations in the future. It could not, however, be on the scale of the past eight years without affecting overall growth. The current military budget is more than twice the amount budgeted for social services and welfare, without including military aid to Zimbabwe-Rhodesia or research and development in the arms industry.

31. Pressures for economic sanctions against South Africa have waxed and waned since the early 1960s. Recently, sanctions have been considered by the international community with regard to four issues: Namibia, Rhodesia, South Africa's apartheid policy, and nuclear matters. Suggestions for sanctions range from total economic isolation to selected, limited actions such as an airline embargo. It currently appears unlikely that anything more than a very limited set of sanctions would be supported by Western industrialized countries to influence South Africa on any of these issues.

32. As a result of the economic independence strategy implemented so far, the economy could sustain an import cutoff for more than a year, although in the long run the white standard of living would erode and unemployment among nonwhites, especially urban blacks, would become severe. Ultimately, of course, an embargo on all foreign inputs would tell, since South Africa still requires some influx of foreign capital, machinery and equipment, technology, managers, and skilled workers. An immediate effect, however, could well be a growth spurt because of import substitution, somewhat comparable to Rhodesia's initial reaction to sanctions after 1965.

33. An export embargo, on the other hand, would cut both ways, toward South Africa and toward the industrialized West and Japan. It is unlikely that the South Africans would carry out a threat to deny minerals exports, except perhaps those from South African industries with low employment, such as chrome, manganese, and the platinum group. It is also virtually certain, however, that the impact on Western investments in South Africa and the dislocations in world minerals industries would be so severe that the major West European countries and Japan would be extremely reluctant to impose such punitive economic measures—in effect a blockade—or to implement them effectively if they were imposed in form.

34. By contrast with its economic situation, South Africa's political relationships, strongly affected as they are and will be by its racial issues, comprise its most important vulnerability. This is also the area in which the South African leadership's perception of its situation seems least sound. Despite Prime Minister Botha's vigorous promotion of a new look, the white community most probably will continue to prevent the kind and pace of movement on racial policy that would attract serious support from nonwhites and effectively disarm foreign critics. Repression therefore

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will remain the principal instrument of internal control.

35. If this prognosis is correct for the next three or four years, it follows that South Africa is unlikely to achieve a significant breakthrough in its relations with other nations during this period. The most that the South Africans can realistically look for is to maintain ties that produce economic and military benefits but not political support.

36. In international affairs, South Africa will be forced gradually toward greater isolation and clandestinity in carrying on international commerce and political affairs. The circle of countries with which South Africa can maintain active overt relationships is likely to constrict somewhat further, and these relationships will become more precarious and sensitive to changes in political leadership, especially in small African or Asian countries.

37. At the same time, the continuing demands for South African minerals production and the likely persistence of racial dissensions that have resonance in the international community will create requirements that South Africa's leaders be talked to, conjured with, and pressured.

#### Implications for the United States

38. Thus, South Africa will continue to be an area of major policy concern to the United States, but direct US influence over South African policy will likely further diminish as South Africa's strategy unfolds, even though this strategy is much less than totally successful.

39. Nevertheless, hostile international reactions to its domestic policies will continue to affect South African decisions, since Pretoria is probably more sensitive to Western criticism and disapproval than often appears to be the case. But confusion and controversy over South African issues will likely intensify in Western countries. Some groups will argue that the Botha program for internal changes merely entrenches apartheid. Others will claim with equal passion that substantial liberalization has taken place and more can be expected. Ironically, if South Africa were to garner support from neighboring states for its regional strategy, the debate would be exacerbated, rather than calmed down.

40. If, as seems generally more probable, South Africa remains strongly at odds with most of its neighbors, this would raise chances for a higher level

of involvement by the Soviets, the Cubans, and their associates. While the likelihood of a Cuban combat commitment in southern Africa against South African forces is currently low—and that of a Soviet troop deployment to the region considerably lower—a confrontation between South Africa and Soviet bloc forces, such as might occur in a civil war in Zimbabwe, would present the United States with unpalatable choices:

- To counter Soviet gains by aiding South Africa.
- To compete with Soviet influence by providing military assistance to African states or movements confronting South Africa.
- To do nothing and await the outcome.

Developments in the region during the next three to four years are unlikely to deteriorate to the point where US choices become this stark, but prospects are for gradually increasing activity by anti-South African guerrillas, South African strikes against insurgent sanctuaries in nearby countries—whether in defense of a “constellation” or of South Africa itself—and occasional skirmishes between South African and other regional forces. Under these conditions, the Soviets and their allies would likely step up military assistance, though still well short of direct combat involvement to their clients in the region.

41. Intensified instability in the region within the next few years could well lead to interference with mining operations or transportation routes and threaten the supply of strategic resources from central as well as southern Africa to the United States, Western Europe, and Japan.

42. Confirmation that South Africa had a nuclear weapons capability would adversely affect US nonproliferation policies. Other countries in the Third World might feel less inhibited about stepping up or openly publicizing their own weapons programs. The United States would come under immediate increased pressure to strengthen international nuclear export controls and to associate itself with resolutions in international forums that condemn South Africa.

43. The nuclear problem aside, as other forms of pressure are seen to be ineffective, momentum is likely to build in the Third World behind demands for mandatory UN economic sanctions against South Africa. Even though such sanctions would be largely ineffective, pressure on Washington to join in sanctions would be great. African countries would use

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whatever leverage they had. Nigeria, the United States' second largest single source of foreign petroleum, could well threaten to halt oil sales to it. Moreover, imposition of even limited sanctions could

cause severe hardships among South Africa's neighbors. The United States and other Western states would be called upon to provide them substantially increased foreign aid and humanitarian assistance.

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